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"Because like – and so I don't – so I think it's maybe, I don't know": Performing traumatic effects while reading Lynda Barry's *The Freddie Stories*

Abstract:

As a picture of childhood composed from the point of view of a young boy named Freddie, who suffers the effects of repeated and ongoing trauma, the experience of reading *The Freddie Stories* presents a number of interpretive challenges: its main character is often split and in various states of disassociation, the difference between dreaming and waking life is not always obvious, multiple monsters appear in different and changeable forms, and as Freddie experiences repeated difficulties with language and cognitive function, his traumatic past enfolds upon the time in which the story is set. In this paper, we analyze how undergraduate readers in teacher education engage with Barry's text, and how their experience of reading about trauma effectively mirrors the psychological effects of Freddie's suffering: getting lost in the text, being at a loss for words, reading in a state of enfolded temporality. Given how trauma disarticulates the self, this paper investigates how Barry's text disarticulates the adult's reading experience.

Introduction

As an ending that also initiates a new beginning, the Afterword in Lynda Barry's revised edition of *The Freddie Stories* simultaneously introduces a series of short narratives, collectively referred to as "The Lost Stories." Just as the countless effects of childhood unpredictably echo throughout the course of our lives, Barry describes these stories – initially left out from earlier editions "for being too strange or depressing" (128) – as a reminder that the time of representation in comics is typically far from straightforward and chronological. Indeed, while these latter qualities suggest an "orderly procession from the past, through the present, to the future" (Morrigan 50), "comic strip time" (126), as Barry calls it, "moves but it doesn't exactly pass" (127). Imbued with "a certain aliveness that feels to be on-going" (128), the affective disposition of this temporal context sees the events of Freddie's life as totally inextricable from the reader's emotionally-laden, historically-situated circumstances of reading: "The WHEN in a comic strip," Barry forcefully argues, "is always NOW" (129).

As a picture of childhood mostly composed from the singular point of view of a boy named Freddie, who suffers the effects of repeated and ongoing trauma, the experience of reading *The Freddie Stories* presents no short supply of interpretive challenges: its main character is often split and in various states of disassociation and glossolalia, the difference between dreaming and waking life is not always obvious, multiple monsters – that are certainly also hallucinated projections – appear in different and changeable forms, and as Freddie experiences repeated difficulties with language and cognitive function, his traumatic pasts enfold upon the time in which the story is actually set. In brief, there are many gaps and dislocations in Freddie's story, and given its context

of illness and trauma, it is no surprise that, as Chute notes of Art Spiegelman's work, "interlacing temporalities [are] part of the text's very structure" ("Temporality and Spatiality" 230). It is in this regard that we consider *The Freddie Stories* as a prime example of "traumics," which Axel and Spivak define simply as "graphic novels that depict trauma" (para. 2).

Moreover, as a story of trauma and trauma's effects, much of what happens to Freddie "exists in a psychic space beyond representation" (Martin Cabré 45), implying that meaning is made as much from what is actually on the page as from what is not: "hidden and happening," Barry writes, "in the gaps between word balloons and panels and the comic strips themselves" (130). This new collection thus presents not only as an opportunity for new forms of textual meaning, but also as an occasion to reconsider those places where meaning is not. As Barry puts it, she "wonder[s] what new gaps have been made for a part of the mind that abides in things which do not connect straight away" (131), and though she is the author, she also recognizes that reading requires something that the author has nothing to do with. "I wrote the stories, I drew the pictures," Barry tells us, "but the world they bring about isn't mine. The gaps aren't mine." "These things," she insists, "don't belong to anyone" (132).

Following Barry's emphasis on the importance of gaps in comics reading, this paper explores how two separate groups of undergraduate readers responded to *The Freddie Stories*, and how their responses appear to mirror the psychological effects of Freddie's illness: getting lost in the text, being at a loss for words, reading in a state of enfolded temporality. Though many authors have indicated that readers might be powerfully and unpredictably affected by literature about traumatic events – for example,

Caruth describes how trauma "brings us to the limits of our understanding" ("Introduction" 4), while Chute appreciates one of Spiegelman's aims as "get[ting] the reader lost on the page" ("Temporality and Spatiality" 237) – it is less common to see such authors examine the responses of actual readers of texts that deal with *difficult knowledge*. As we describe in the following pages, the difficulty of such texts compels the reader to respond in similarly difficult fashion, where in their responses – which narrate memory, moments of emotional breakdown, and signs of temporal dislocation – "meaning … often overflows the bounds of the text's plot" (Crawford 362). Though the reader is not necessarily traumatized, it appears that in reading about the destructive effects of childhood trauma – where "past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition" (Stolorow 160) – readers may nonetheless experience conditions associated with the emotional, somatic, and temporal anxieties of such suffering. In reading and responding to trauma, it thus appears that, as LaCapra writes, "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent, one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (42).

In what follows, we discuss the conceptual history of trauma, with a particular emphasis on psychoanalytic understandings of the belated effects of traumatic memory. As a way to approach the context of reading, we also describe how literary theorists have referred to the organizational complexities of trauma narratives, and how the reader's engagement with such texts should be viewed as an encounter with *difficult knowledge*. In the latter sections of this paper, we explore a series of reader responses to *The Freddie Stories*, paying special attention to how we can use our knowledge of trauma's effects and posttraumatic response to understand the reader's experience of engaging with a

particular articulation of literary trauma. First, however, and as a way to focus our discussion, we provide a brief synopsis of Barry's text, using a few especially evocative panels to guide the conceptual inquiry that follows.

The Freddie Stories

Though first collected in book form in 1999, the four-panel strips that make up *The Freddie Stories* were initially published in the early 90s in Barry's long-running comics series, "Ernie Pook's Comeek." Some of Barry's other well-known works include *The Good Times are Killing Me*, *One Hundred Demons*, whose stories Barry describes with the playful term "autobifictionalography," and four more recent books that concentrate on the creative acts and impulses of writing and drawing: the Eisner Award-winning *What It Is*, *Picture This*, *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, and *Making Comics*. Even with these latter texts, however, Barry's thematic focus predominantly rests on the joys, confusions, and struggles of childhood and adolescence. As Kirtley notes of Barry's reputation within the world of comics art, she is "well known … for a childlike, unaffected cartooning style that accentuates a frequent emphasis on childhood, as well as loquacious, often elegant narration within panels and the use of careful, telling details that underscore bittersweet reminiscences of youth" (xii).

3. WHAT IS REALLY GOOD IS IF YOU ALSO HAVE POTATO CHIPS TO PUT IN THE SANDWICH AND A BANANA TO EAT WITH IT. AND A GIANT MILK AND WHAT IS REALLY GOOD IS IF YOU EAT ON TV TRAYS IN FRONT OF YOUR FAVORITE SHOW. TRY IT ON YOUR SISTERS OR ANYONE WHO IS HUNGRY AND SAD. IT IS THE BEST FOOD FOR SAD PEOPLE! THAT'S ALL FOLKS UNTIL NEXT TIME FROM YOUR WORLD-FAMOUS CHEF OF COOKING, I'M FREDDY.
FREDDY, YOU ARE INCREDIBLE AND THIS SANDWICH IS ALSO VERY INCREDIBLE
THIS SAND-WICH IS WICKED.

Fig. 1: *The Freddie Stories* 7

Though the book opens on a light and

humorous note – with Freddie, who is about eight years old, making baloney sandwiches for his older sisters, Marlys and Maybonne – things take a darker turn when he spends the summer at his cousin Arnold's house, who hangs out with an aggressive character named Jim-Jimmy-Jim. Following these boys around, Freddie overhears their intentions to set a house on fire, and though he tries to thwart these plans, Jim-Jimmy-Jim simply sets fire to another house: "And the house had a lady in it," Freddie narrates matter-of-factly, "and that lady died" (25).

Following this violent scene, Freddie begins to hallucinate the image of a burning skull on the face of almost everyone he encounters, and describing these visions as "a ghost that haunts the eyeballs" (33), Freddie appears to suffer from a deep sense of guilt about the woman who died in the fire. As he tells us, "a voice in my brain cells says, 'Burning changes everything' a lady's voice, a scalded voice, hers" (29). As an attempt at subduing these visions and voices, Freddie decides to concentrate on – as he calls them – "the good things in life," such as an encyclopedic entry on "Eogyrinus the ancient lonely amphibian" (38). However, as he tries to focus his thoughts, Freddie also – *at the exact same time* – considers a series of "violent action[s]" (39), and as this unwanted juxtaposition indicates, Freddie is unable to totally suppress his disturbing thoughts by a simple gesture of will. On the pages that follow, disquieting images confusingly coexist with those that are more innocuous and seemingly lighthearted.

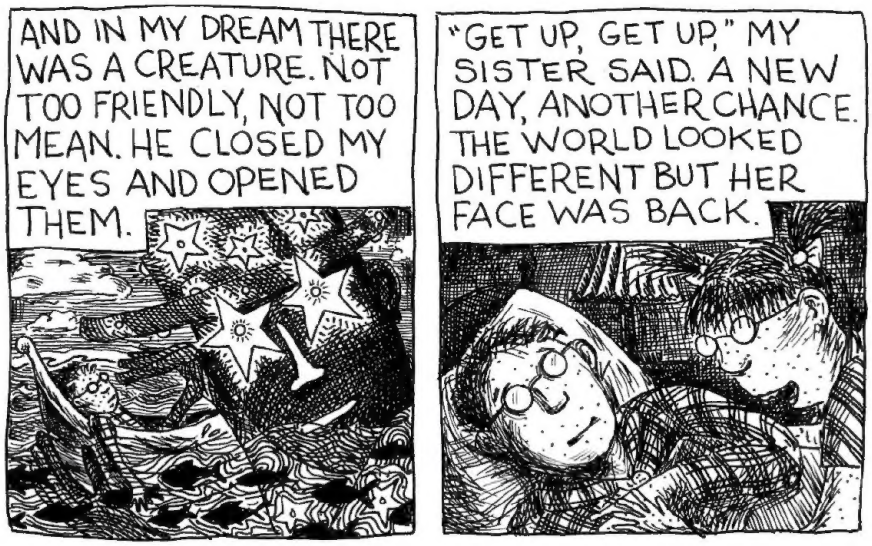

AND IN MY DREAM THERE WAS A CREATURE. NOT TOO FRIENDLY, NOT TOO MEAN. HE CLOSED MY EYES AND OPENED THEM.
"GET UP, GET UP," MY SISTER SAID. A NEW DAY, ANOTHER CHANCE. THE WORLD LOOKED DIFFERENT BUT HER FACE WAS BACK.

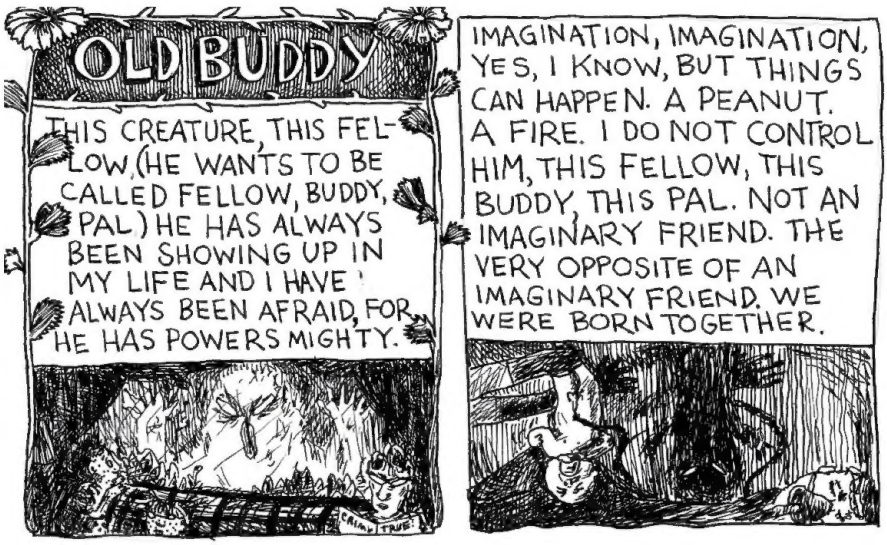
Fig. 2: *The Freddie Stories* 41

On the night before the new school year begins, Freddie dreams about a smiling apparition – "Not too friendly, not too mean" (41) – who seems to offer some kind of reprieve from the constant stress of burning skulls. "He closed my eyes and opened them," Freddie tells us, and as Marlys shakes him awake, Freddie notices that he can now see his sister's actual face: "The world looked different," he nervously admits, "but her face was back" (41).

In his fourth-grade classroom, Freddie is seated in front of a boy named Glenn, who constantly insults him by using such names as "Barfing Fag" (44) and "Fag-O" (52). Despite this teasing, however, Freddie and Glenn develop a sort of acquaintanceship, though as Freddie notes, it is hardly peaceful: "There are certain people who once you become friends with them they will try to rule your life" (46). Apart from the starry-eyed, and perhaps benevolent, creature that appears in his dreams, Freddie soon describes another figure, which he calls the "Night Monster," and though he tries to convince himself of this monster's fictional status – "Obviously my imagination," he tells himself (54) – it is in the context of this terrifying figure's first appearance that Freddie discloses that Glenn has been abusing him in ways exponentially worse than verbal teasing. Alone in his basement with Freddie, Glenn would tell him, "you are my prisoner of war …

certain things will happen to you'" (59), and though he doesn't describe the full extent of what takes place, Freddie nonetheless admits that, "Certain things did." Unsurprisingly, Glenn then blames Freddie for his abusive behaviour: "It was your idea," he tells him, "I hate what you make me do to you" (60).

On the next day, Glenn's seat is empty, and though he is initially relieved, Freddie soon finds out that Glenn has actually died from choking on a peanut. In response, and as if in a trance, he then begins obsessively singing out loud: "Found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut just now" (62). In what follows, Freddie appears to blame himself for Glenn's death, as the Night Monster's motivations are slowly felt as inseparable from his own. "The night they found Glenn," he describes, "the Night Monster found me. He had Glenn in his sack. 'You or him?' … 'Him,' I said. 'Him. Him for sure'" (62).


OLD BUDDY
THIS CREATURE, THIS FELLOW, (HE WANTS TO BE CALLED FELLOW, BUDDY, PAL) HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SHOWING UP IN MY LIFE AND I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AFRAID, FOR HE HAS POWERS MIGHTY.
IMAGINATION, IMAGINATION, YES, I KNOW, BUT THINGS CAN HAPPEN. A PEANUT. A FIRE. I DO NOT CONTROL HIM, THIS FELLOW, THIS BUDDY, THIS PAL. NOT AN IMAGINARY FRIEND. THE VERY OPPOSITE OF AN IMAGINARY FRIEND. WE WERE BORN TOGETHER.
Fig. 3: *The Freddie Stories* 64

At this point in the narrative, events, identities, and timelines begin to enfold and appear irreparably confused, as Freddie describes the Night Monster – now called "Old Buddy" – as a part of himself that he cannot control, his negative thoughts projected in physical form. Above the disturbing image of a baby born with a demonic shadow, Freddie describes Old Buddy as inseparable from himself, as well as responsible for the deaths around him: "I do not control him, this fellow. … The very opposite of an

imaginary friend." (64). Though Freddie attempts to subdue these negative thoughts, it appears that a part of him will not allow them to be so easily forgotten: "The fellow knows," Freddie notes, "The fellow saw, and then he killed Glenn with a peanut" (65). As one who knows and sees everything – both how Freddie was harmed *and* how he wished to harm his attacker – Old Buddy appears as a frightening force of knowledge and surveillance, and though he tries to employ such self-protective strategies as repeatedly singing "Here Comes the Sun" (66) and obsessively screaming "2 + 2 + 2 + 2" (69), since the monster is an externalization of his thoughts, Freddie cannot escape his simultaneous *fear of* and *desire for* punishment.

AND MY WORLD WIGGLED ITS FINGERS AT THEM AND WOBBLED THE AIR LIKE SHIMMERING HEAT ABOVE A BLACK TAR ROAD AND MY SISTER BEGAN TO PRAY.

Fig. 4: *The Freddie Stories* 79

Over the next many pages, Freddie's psychological state begins to seriously affect his physical health, and as he continues to hallucinate – for instance, seeing "a tiny burning face" (72) in the tip of his mom's cigarette – he develops a severe fever and falls deeper away from the world of social existence. Though his oldest sister, Maybonne, is in the next room, Freddie appears as if in some other land, "drowning" and "burning" (78), and then transported by two skeletal figures into the belly of "Old Buddy." Despite this passage, however, Freddie continues to hear the voices around him, yet also soon describes himself as dead: "From inside Old Buddy I heard it all" (79). "What happened next," he tells us, "I cannot know because I died" (80).

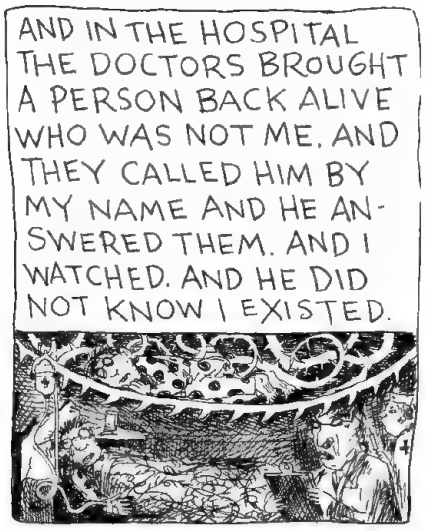

AND IN THE HOSPITAL THE DOCTORS BROUGHT A PERSON BACK ALIVE WHO WAS NOT ME. AND THEY CALLED HIM BY MY NAME AND HE ANSWERED THEM. AND I WATCHED. AND HE DID NOT KNOW I EXISTED.

Fig. 5: *The Freddie Stories* 81

In the hospital, Freddie's body is inert, yet above – in the sharp vines of Old Buddy's stomach – the Freddie who narrates has been effectively torn away from "the me that was not me" (82). "Who are you?" (83) Freddie attempts to ask this new, dissociated version of himself, yet he gets no answer: "He did not know I existed" (81).

Separated along the lines of psyche and soma, these two Freddies also appear as under the direction of two distinct monsters: in the psychic territory of Old Buddy (where Freddie sees and thinks but cannot communicate), and in the purely physical, mindless region of the starry-eyed creature, who holds the non-thinking Freddie in a state of mental incapacity and abeyance. Just as there are two Freddies, there are thus two complementary, imaginary creatures, though as Old Buddy "join[s] the shadows" (90), the starry-eyed creature – now dubbed "New Buddy" as well as "Sabu Baba" (94) – bridges the gap between the competing

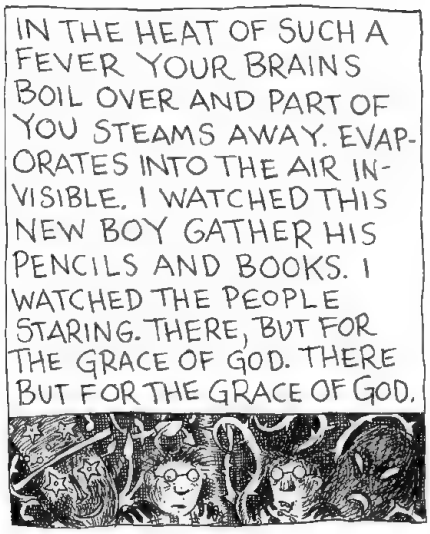

IN THE HEAT OF SUCH A FEVER YOUR BRAINS BOIL OVER AND PART OF YOU STEAMS AWAY. EVAPORATES INTO THE AIR INVISIBLE. I WATCHED THIS NEW BOY GATHER HIS PENCILS AND BOOKS. I WATCHED THE PEOPLE STARING. THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD. THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD.

Fig. 6: *The Freddie Stories* 83

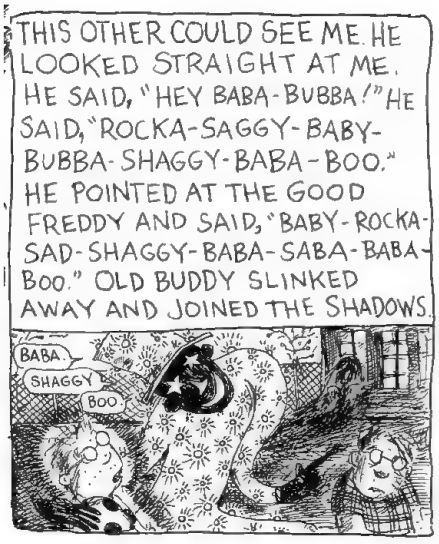

THIS OTHER COULD SEE ME. HE LOOKED STRAIGHT AT ME. HE SAID, "HEY BABA-BUBBA!" HE SAID, "ROCKA-SAGGY-BABY-BUBBA-SHAGGY-BABA-BOO." HE POINTED AT THE GOOD FREDDY AND SAID, "BABY-ROCKA-SAD-SHAGGY-BABA-SABA-BABA-BOO." OLD BUDDY SLINKED AWAY AND JOINED THE SHADOWS.
BABA
SHAGGY
BOO

Fig. 7: *The Freddie Stories* 90

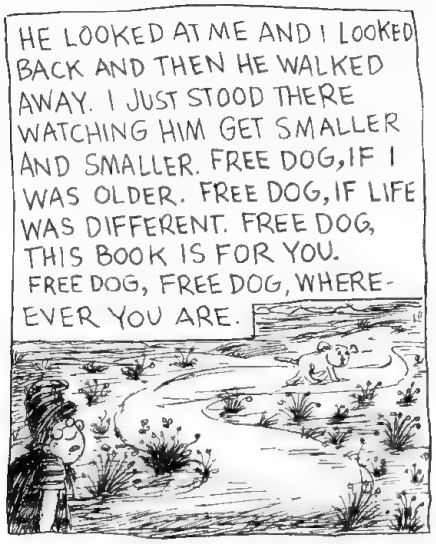
Freddies, while speaking an identical, nonsensical language to both. As a sort of incantation, Marlys asks her brother, "Who is Baby-Baba-Rocka-Shaggy-Mama-Baba-Saba-Sister-Brother-Baba-Doctor-Shaggy-Backa-Baba-Bubba-Baby-Boo?" (94), and as she poses this seemingly absurd question, their mother strikes Marlys hard in the face, giving her a bloody lip: "'Marlys, you are so stupid!" she screams, "Marlys, you idiot!" (94). Hearing this question, however, Freddie again becomes centred within himself: "The room twirled a little and then went dark," he tells us, "When the light came back I was seeing out of Freddie's eye holes" (94).

As it turns out, New Buddy closely resembled a doll that Freddie used to play with, though which his mother burned in the fireplace; "He got turned into ashes," Freddie writes, "and his smoke went up-up-up" (105). In what seems to be a response to this memory, Freddie immediately inhabits the role of a character with exaggerated effeminacy called "El Fagtastico," and though this part of the story isn't told in full, it seems that his mother's anger about the doll is somehow related to Freddie's absent father. "Dad was a fag," Freddie notes, "is, was, I cannot tell you" (104), as his mother ominously states, in reference to Freddie's behaviour: "The sins of the father." The 'newness' of New Buddy is therefore a pretense for something much older, as in relation to trauma, new responses and figures may recall – while simultaneously concealing – a past that does not want to be known, a past that the present simply cannot abide.

UNCHANGE
AFTER SHAGGY BABA WAS ASHES AND SMOKE, THERE CAME OLD BUDDY, MADE AT FIRST OF HAIR FROM MOMS HAIRBRUSH THAT SHE PULLED FROM THE BRISTLES AND ROLLED IN A BALL AND SET IN THE ASHTRAY WITH THE CIGARETTE BUTTS.

Fig. 8: *The Freddie Stories* 108

Given the recurrent imagery of fires throughout this text, and since Freddie's doll was also burned in a fire, there appears an open question regarding the content of Freddie's earliest trauma, a content that Freddie himself is certainly also unaware of. As Caruth describes this gap in knowledge, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way that it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" ("Unclaimed Experience" 4). It is therefore hard to know how Freddie's traumatic responses to Glenn's death, as well as to that of the lady who died in the fire, may echo an earlier, perhaps inarticulable, experience. However, in a series of four panels called "Unchange," reference is made to a similar recurrence; just as New Buddy perishes in fire and is somehow related to his father, Old Buddy returns in smoldering ashes and as an intimate manifestation of Freddie's mother, an outgrowth of what in her is decidedly abject. Though fire may change an object's constitution, these panels focus on how Old Buddy remains unchanged despite fire, and cannot simply be willed away. Constructed from a burning mixture of his mother's hair and cigarette ashes, Old Buddy persists, just as the emotional content of traumatic memory – even if the original event has been forgotten – perseveres under new and often unfamiliar guises.


HE LOOKED AT ME AND I LOOKED BACK AND THEN HE WALKED AWAY. I JUST STOOD THERE WATCHING HIM GET SMALLER AND SMALLER. FREE DOG, IF I WAS OLDER. FREE DOG, IF LIFE WAS DIFFERENT. FREE DOG, THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU. FREE DOG, FREE DOG, WHEREEVER YOU ARE.
Fig. 9: *The Freddie Stories* 125

In the final panels of Freddie's story, he encounters an abandoned dog, a "Free Dog, just sitting there for anyone to take" (124), and after trying, unsuccessfully, to bring this dog home, Freddie laments

that if things were only different he would be able to keep his new friend: "Free Dog, if I was older," he says, "Free Dog, if life was different" (125). Dedicating his book to this stray animal, the last thing we see is the dog's dejected face staring back at a worried Freddie. In the Afterword, however, Barry's discussion of "comic strip time" (126) allows her readers to imagine how Freddie and Free Dog may eventually live together. "If these pages burned up in a fire," Barry writes, "Free Dog and Freddie would survive. But where? And how?" (128).

In the next part of this paper, we describe how trauma decenters human memory and human experience. We also explore how the unrepresentable nature of trauma, in which "all temporality seems to collapse" (Hernandez 138) and "the language available appears to be useless" (139), invariably affects and challenges the reader's attempts to comprehend the story of trauma as literal, straightforward narrative.

Trauma

Throughout this section, we explicitly refer to panels from *The Freddie Stories* as a way to talk about the chronologically upsetting and dissociative experiences of trauma. As a way to begin describing the almost indescribable nature of trauma, many theorists begin by stressing the radically unassimilated, and unassimilable, effects of traumatic experience. As Halfon and Weinstein indicate, trauma involves a "sudden disruption and breakdown that occurs when the psyche is flooded with excessive stimulation that cannot be integrated or assimilated in

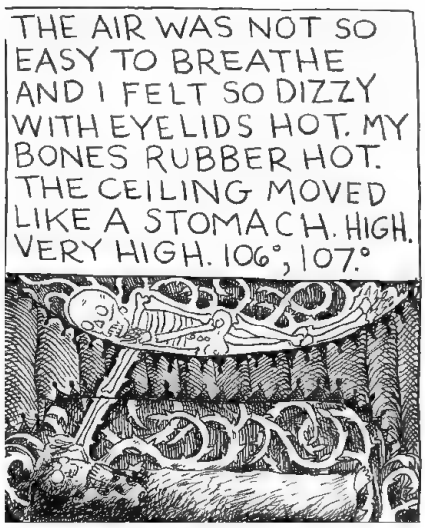
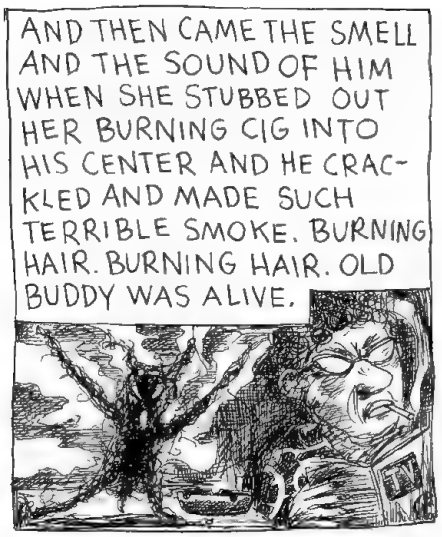

THE AIR WAS NOT SO EASY TO BREATHE AND I FELT SO DIZZY WITH EYELIDS HOT. MY BONES RUBBER HOT. THE CEILING MOVED LIKE A STOMACH. HIGH. VERY HIGH. 106°, 107.°

Fig. 10: *The Freddie Stories* 76

the usual way. In this case, a postulated protective barrier is breached, the ego is overwhelmed and loses its mediating capacity" (S123). While most events that we may encounter in everyday life are easily incorporated into our existing mental structures, traumatic events bypass our capacity for memory and leave us "without a sense of recognition" (Mitchell 132), such that the "traumatized … become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, "Introduction" 5).

In Sigmund Freud's classic account of Sergei Pankejeff's (*The Wolfman's*) psychoanalytic treatment, he locates the origins of his patient's nervous condition in a traumatic event from childhood, in which he may have witnessed a sexual act between his parents that his undeveloped, infantile cognitive capacities could not yet process. As a child, Sergei literally did not know what he was seeing, and given this degree of incomprehension, the event was only able to enter his consciousness as a kind of blur, "in a psychic space beyond representation" (Martin Cabré 45). However, as with the encroachment of the skeleton in the above panel, this event would later *become traumatic* in ways unknown to memory and language, such as through otherwise inexplicable physical symptoms and troubling dreams. To be traumatized is therefore "to be possessed by an image" (Caruth, "Introduction" 5) that cannot be remembered or talked about, or which, in other words, is "in excess of our frames of reference" (Felman and Laub 5).


AND THEN CAME THE SMELL AND THE SOUND OF HIM WHEN SHE STUBBED OUT HER BURNING CIG INTO HIS CENTER AND HE CRACKLED AND MADE SUCH TERRIBLE SMOKE. BURNING HAIR. BURNING HAIR. OLD BUDDY WAS ALIVE.
Fig. 11: *The Freddie Stories* 108

Unable to remove himself from the "endless loop" (Seligman 120) of confounded past and present, Freddie's traumatic experiences are thus, in our view,

an "unwitting reenactment" (Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 2) of a past that, paradoxically, has not yet occurred; "it was lived through," Mather and Marsden note, "but not 'experienced'" (212). As "a memory illness" (Prager 229), trauma is also inevitably hard to narrate, given how the present is ceaselessly twisted and distorted by the unrecognizable past. The unsure figure of Old Buddy, for instance, changeable in form but not in character, seems to indicate how Freddie's past and present are irreparably entangled. For Seligman, such an "*excess of* [temporal] *simultaneity over subsequency*" (120), generates the timeless, extra-temporal nature of posttraumatic experience, further inhibiting the traumatic subject's ability to remember and make meaning from their past. If it cannot be "transformed into a story … with a beginning, a middle and an end" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 177), the past continues to operate according to the illegible scripts of "trauma time," which Edkins characterizes as antithetical to chronological sense. So long as Freddie is unable to extricate himself from the belated effects of earlier trauma – including "intrusion symptoms … avoidance symptoms … [and] negative alterations in cognition and mood" (Schimmenti and Caretti 108) – his relationship to life will remain, as Mitchell puts it, "untimely ripped" (121).

Drawing a distinction between "narrative memory" and "memories formed under the influence of trauma" (S123), Halfon and Weinstein argue that because of their incapacity to coincide with the narrative constructs we typically use to understand lived experience, the latter are "stored differently,"

Fig. 12: *The Freddie Stories* 85

strangely unrepresentable and inaccessible. In her discussion of how trauma can be both remembered *and* forgotten, Morrigan presents the possibility of "structural dissociation," in which "one part of the personality remembers, and another does not" (55). After Freddie's illness leaves him in pieces that collectively symbolize the "utterly incompatible worlds" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 177) of traumatic and ordinary experience, the remembering part of himself appears divided from another part that has no memory at all. "Trauma makes a breach," Mitchell writes, "that empties the person out" (129), and in Freddie's case, this emptiness suggests "an absolute present without presence" (Martin Cabré 45), a version of self that is temporarily lived with zero degree of self-reflection.

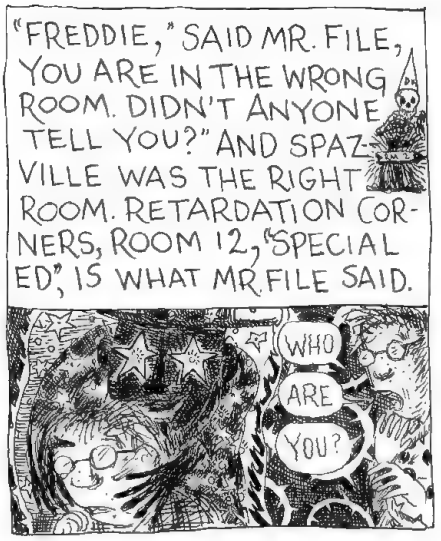
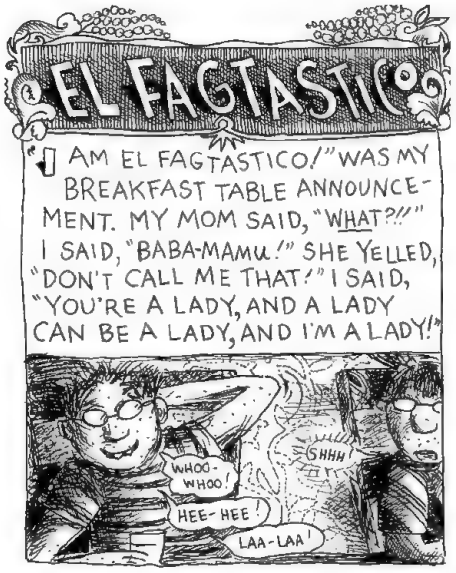

"FREDDIE," SAID MR. FILE, YOU ARE IN THE WRONG ROOM. DIDN'T ANYONE TELL YOU?" AND SPAZ-VILLE WAS THE RIGHT ROOM. RETARDATION CORNERS, ROOM 12, "SPECIAL ED", IS WHAT MR. FILE SAID.
WHO ARE YOU?

Fig. 13: *The Freddie Stories* 83

Separated from the suffering self inside of Old Buddy's vine-encrusted stomach, the non-reflective, mindless Freddie appears outside of historical time, as though abandoned in a "space of no place and nonexistence" (Martin Cabré 45). For Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, if a child's suffering exceeds their cognitive capacity for understanding (as with Freud's *Wolfman*), not only may they experience belated or displaced effects, but they also may find themselves in a place only describable through the language of metaphor: "they are far away in the universe; they are flying at a colossal speed among the stars; they feel so thin that they pass without hindrance through the densest substances; where they are, there is no time; past, present, and future are simultaneous" (32). Without the linking processes of time and narrative memory, and so

long as Old Buddy's stomach and all it contains is somewhere else, non-reflective Freddie is stuck in a seemingly safe and endless present, with pain forcefully confounded and pushed away. However, despite this appearance of safety, Barry's art – which "replicates the structure of traumatic memory with its fragmentation, condensation, and placement of elements in space" (Chute, "Materializing Memory" 293) – also describes this condition of splitting as one of endless torment, where "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness [and] in its refusal to be simply located" (Caruth, "Introduction" 9). Though non-reflective Freddie may appear secure and safely compliant, this security is an illusion, and Freddie's question – "Who are you?" – presents as a manifestation of the voice of trauma's invisible wound, which as Caruth describes, "addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" ("Unclaimed Experience" 4).

Speaking the voice of a wound, the language of the traumatized often reflects their feelings and experiences of antisocial timelessness: "Torn from the communal fabric of being-in-time, trauma remains insulated from human dialogue" (Stolorow 160). Along with the rambling discourse of "Shaggy-Baba-Rocka" (94) and his song about finding a peanut, which both suggest a general uncertainty with language, the emergence of "El Fagtastico" represents the extent to which Freddie cannot identify with or recognize himself. In an overreliance on imitation – and while language is always partly mimetic, meaningful communication requires more


EL FAGTASTICO
"I AM EL FAGTASTICO!" WAS MY BREAKFAST TABLE ANNOUNCEMENT. MY MOM SAID, "WHAT?!!" I SAID, "BABA-MAMU!" SHE YELLED, "DON'T CALL ME THAT!" I SAID, "YOU'RE A LADY, AND A LADY CAN BE A LADY, AND I'M A LADY!"
WHOO-WHOO!
HEE-HEE!
LAA-LAA!
SHHH!
Fig. 14: *The Freddie Stories* 102

than copying – those who experience trauma, as we have already mentioned, may be alienated from the self-regulatory purposes of narrative. Indeed, as Freddie speaks "nonreflectively, wearing the mantle of someone else" (Mitchell 132), the character of "El Fagtastico" appears as a hyper-representation of feeling divorced from useful narrative meaning. Though, as in a dream, Freddie's performance may certainly be read as a kind of metaphoric symbolization, the narrative links are severed: "traumatic experiences do not produce memories but actualities" (Hernandez 140).

As we shall see in the following section of this paper, since Barry often displays the *effects* of Freddie's memory – including the "gaps, fragments, positions, layers, circularities" (Chute, "Materializing Memory" 304) – rather than the memories themselves, Barry's novel also seems to lack what Hernandez refers to as "the stabilizing function of narrative" (140). As a representation *of* trauma, the novel thus shares certain structural similarities *with* trauma, whose outcomes – as we have seen – are often belated, narratively confused, reflectively empty, outside of linear time, and linguistically inappropriate. In our interpretations of reader's responses to this graphic text, we therefore notice how readers embody their reactions *as if* in response to trauma, and while we are not claiming that readers were traumatized by *The Freddie Stories,* their responses do confirm how reading can sometimes *feel like* a traumatic event.

Reader's Responses

In the following pages, we theorize how readers of graphic narrative – nine in total, who met for approximately an hour and a half to discuss Barry's text – expressed their encounters regarding the *difficult knowledge* (Britzman, "Lost Subjects," "If the Story"; Cohen-Evron; Garrett; Simon; Zembylas) of Freddie's story of traumatic childhood. Six

of the readers were undergraduate students in a secondary-level teacher education program at a large research university in Western Canada, while the other three were currently studying at an art and design university in a Central Canadian city, with ambitions to teach in the near future. Given their shared positions as future educators, we understand the reading experiences that our participants describe as an interaction between their present situation of reading, desires regarding their future work with young people, and memories and recollections from childhood. Though our participants were recruited from various classes in their respective institutions, these group discussions took place outside of class time. In these meetings, we acted as facilitators and moderators, keeping the conversations on track (through prompts and questions about the text) while also encouraging a free exchange of ideas amongst the readers.

In the context of *difficult knowledge* (a concept originally developed by Deborah Britzman), adult readers cannot help but encounter traces of their emotional history in narratives such as Barry's. As Farley notes, a text that deals with *difficult knowledge* "is difficult not only because of its inclusion of traumatic content," but also because such content poses a significant psychical challenge to readers, "who, in efforts to understand such knowledge, may be confronted with affective traces of an internal history" (539). Put simply, because "the creation of a work of art is in excess of the artist's intentions" (Britzman, "Monsters" 255), stories dealing with traumatic content may trigger readers to confront their own unacknowledged histories. Moreover, since these histories may have been forgotten, repressed, or otherwise transformed by the condensations and displacements of memory, it is likely that readers may not be able to recognize how their reactions are somehow linked to personal history. In what follows, we therefore remain

concerned with *how* readers respond to *The Freddie Stories*, rather than trying to retrace such responses back to an actual history; suffice it to say that for adult readers, childhood persists as "a spectral and silent presence in [our] subjective experience of self" (O'Loughlin 100). As we indicate how Freddie's traumatic experiences reverberated in these reader's group discussions, we organize their responses according to the following three thematic categories, which emerged through an inductive process of data analysis: Getting Lost in Confusing Chronologies; The Physical Effects of Reading; and Memory-Reading. After collecting and transcribing the group discussions, we moved through the following steps of data analysis:

- Iterative Reading: We repeatedly read through both sets of transcripts, making preliminary notes regarding potential emergent codes and themes.
- Starring the Text: After reading the transcripts a few times, we allowed ourselves to star the texts, annotating and scribbling our thoughts in a search for preliminary patterns.
- Conceptualizing Emergence: We then began to conceptualize our emergent categories and subcategories in reference to psychoanalytic theory. It was at this point that our focus on expressions of trauma-related experience was refined.
- Naming: Converging between the inductively created codes and our broader theoretical framework, we created the aforementioned three categories, which we will now use to structure our findings in the following section.

We should also note that – as a way to contextualize their responses – we provide certain demographic information about our participants, though have otherwise concealed their identities though the use of pseudonyms.

Getting Lost in Confusing Chronologies

Unsurprisingly, the experience of reading about emotional and psychic disturbance can be confusing and jarring, especially when the story is told from a child's first person point of view. Megan, a 30-year-old teacher education student who self-identifies as Pagan, discussed how since *The Freddie Stories* is told from Freddie's perspective – from *within* the trauma itself – there is an immediacy that feels necessarily disorienting. "*It's about childhood trauma*," she notes, "*from the perspective of somebody ... who does not know that they're going through trauma, and nobody else knows [either].*" Given Freddie's lack of objectivity about his situation, getting lost in the story appears as a necessary effect of reading it: "*It's really interesting*," Megan continued, "*how much you don't know what's going on, because it really is ... [a] visceral, experiential thing that is happening in the present moment to him, and not looked at from a critical perspective*." Similarly, Katie – a 21-year-old student in teacher education who characterized early adolescence as a mixture of "*turmoil, insecurity, but also mystery, adventure ... excitement and impatience*" – described how since "*even Freddie isn't sure of what he's thinking*," the experience of entering his state of mind "*can be really confusing for a reader*." For Simon, a 26-year-old after-degree student in teacher education, reading this first-person point of view is made all the more complicated because of Freddie's split, between what he called "*the placid, shell Freddie*" and "*Freddie ... trapped inside his head with all the demons and everything.*" Simon described the experience of reading this split, where readers observe a version of Freddie observing himself, as a struggle between subjective states of absence and presence, which he also found exceptionally hard to articulate: "*After [Freddie] gets out of the hospital*," Simon told us, "*he's not really all*

there, like he's not present-ness like. He's not present anymore in the way that he was before, because like – and so I don't – so I think it's maybe ... I don't know." Indeed, for many of these readers, a variation of "I don't know" well describes the overall tenor of their responses.

Aly, a fourth-year student in art and design with a focus in curatorial studies, described her experience as one of being repeatedly "*discomforted*" and "*disturbed*": "*I'd get into a place of comfort*," she explained, "*and then it would be jarring again, and it was just this cycle of ... never being fully comfortable within the text.*" Given the aforementioned immediacy of Freddie's address, Aly also remarked how the many unspecified details in Freddie's story made it all the more "*difficult ... [and] really fucked u*p": "*not knowing*," she contended, "*was ... a huge part*" of why she felt disturbed. Corey, a 21-year-old teacher education student with a passion for filmmaking, pointed to the same part of the storyline in which Simon also felt especially confused; as he put it: "*This is where I lost the plot.*" Following Freddie's time in the hospital, Corey exclaimed, "*I literally don't know what happened afterwards ... [but] something really shifted there ... something I can't put my finger on.*" Just as Freddie, within his trauma, cannot sufficiently communicate his experiences, so are there gaps in Corey's reading: "*I don't know what else happens there*," he told us, "*but I'm also completely lost.*" In this context, Denny – a 19-year-old student in the art and design university's Illustration program – offered a description of Freddie's experiences that may also refer to the reader's difficulties: "*Being pushed down and weighed down by forces inside and outside and ... just kind of helpless.*"

As a way of negotiating through these feelings of helplessness, some of these readers made attempts to reenter the text, recursively trying to maintain their grasp on Freddie's slippery sense of chronology and plot. For Katie, who described how she was "*often very upset reading it*" and "*[had] to go back*" multiple times, as she nonetheless acknowledged, "*I still don't really know what happened.*" Corey also found himself going back repeatedly to certain parts of the text – as he told us, "*I reread several passages over and over and over again*"– yet, as with Katie, these multiple readings hardly clarified anything. "*I still have a lot of lingering questions*," he remarked, "*and I still don't know exactly what happened there, what it's about.*"

Certain readers also perceived a link between Freddie's glossolalia and an exceedingly confusing presentation of chronological detail. While Simon admitted that he, "*didn't know to interpret the nonsense speech*," he also had trouble finding his way back into those parts of the text where such speech was especially prominent: "*Well, it looks like*," he began, while trying to explain the appearance of Freddie's hallucinations, "*you know, the first one, the Sabu Baba on 94, it's set in the past and then the – so like, it's an old toy or doll and then ... well ...*" As he frantically flipped through the pages, he then posed the following questions out loud: "*Where's the part where she, his mom beats Marlys or something? ... Oh, is this it? No, that's not it. ... I don't know, maybe there's ... Can't find it now.*" Resigned to his inability to center himself narratively in the text, similar to someone suffering from posttraumatic response, Simon summarized his own experiences by simply stating: "*I had a hard time understanding.*" As Derek, a 28-year-old student in Industrial Design, put it, this "*hard time*" may also refer to the unstable line that Freddie walks between illness and health, similar in feeling and shape to what he

referred to as the "*line between what's imagination and what's dreams*." If we are indeed situated, along with Freddie, in what Megan called a "*weird overlap between dreams and wakefulness*," then feelings of rupture may also be said to relate to – and, in effect, appear as *a belated expression of* – the missing parts of Freddie's experience, a quintessential effect of trauma. As a performance of belated effects, parts of Freddie's trauma may not even be recognized as such until they are read by the reader of his stories. It therefore appears that part of the experience of reading *along with* trauma may be an overwhelming and necessary feeling of failure and absence: of not being able to read, while at the same time not knowing at all what one is actually missing in reading.

However, while these feelings of failure and being disjointed appeared to upset many readers, they also provided others with signs of hope. For instance, Heather – a 21-year-old Indigenous woman in teacher education, who grew up on a reserve just outside of a major city – connected her own experiences as a young writer to the lack of narrative cohesion in Barry's text. "*As a kid*," she told us, *"I had all these crazy ideas, and I wanted to write them all down ... but a lot of the time they couldn't come*." Freddie's lack of communication, then, appears to Heather as part of the temporary and necessary challenges of growing up: "*Childhood is messy*," she remarked, "*and it's puzzle pieces, and jigsaws, and missing things*," and as young people learn to self-articulate, "*you always have to get across those gaps, or caverns*."

Suzanne, who was also a 21-year-old Indigenous teacher education student and from a small town in Northern Canada, conveyed similar sentiments of hope in her response to the gaps in Freddie's story, and while she noted that she was also "*really confused*," instead of this being "*a sad experience*," she said "*it was kind of healing*." In

her recognition that, because of the traumatic nature of his experiences, Freddie's story cannot be told in full, Suzanne was also able to see how the gaps in her own life – and even though she may not yet be able to address their shape – may, in their absence, represent experiences that she will eventually be able to both acknowledge and communicate. "*It was nice*," she continued, "*to have something to relate that back to, and it was a way for me to deal with some of those hard feelings*." Moreover, though *The Freddie Stories* is not an autobiographical narrative, Suzanne interpreted Barry's creative work as a way to articulate "*things that she had buried inside her*," and "*a process*" of indirect and belated expression that "*would have been really hard for her as a writer to do*." Finding hope in a future moment of potential self-expression, Suzanne therefore referred to Freddie's trauma as a story of the author's resilience, while also linking this compelling suggestion back to her own life; as she remarked, "*I hope that someday I'll be able to express things that I'm not able to express yet*."

The Physical Effects of Reading

From what we have seen in the comments above, reading the difficult details of Freddie's life may upset a reader's sense of narrative as something straightforwardly told; in reading through trauma, it thus appears that "a postulated protective barrier is breached" (Halfon and Weinstein S123), similar to that which Freddie himself encounters as posttraumatic response. Moreover, as an effect of this breach, while readers experience problems with recall and a variety of other emotional disturbances, they may also encounter distinctly physical expressions of discomfort, which – just as trauma is felt as both a psychic and physical force – represents a materialization and somatization of traumatic affect in reading. For example, as Denny described the relentless, breathless

force of Freddie's suffering – "*There's very little release in the book, [or] relief from the nastiness that's scrambled through the whole thing*" – Aly found herself "*getting tired a lot*" and feeling extremely exhausted while reading: it was "*so draining ... and so taxing that I needed to take a break.*" Also, as Aly made sure to clarify, since one of the major reasons why she reads graphic novels is because of their "*comforting and relaxing*" qualities, such exhaustion is especially uncharacteristic.

Similar to Aly, Katie noted that she typically reads comics as a means of "*escapism*," though given the incessant nature of Freddie's intolerable experiences, "*it was*," as she told us, "*a chore ... [and] really hard for me to get through*." Unlike a relaxing and peaceful read, *The Freddie Stories* often compelled its readers to feelings and narrative structures of difficulty and resistance: "*It's not like I didn't enjoy it*," Katie said, "*but I had to, every night, be like, 'You have to read'*." Forcing herself to get through the text, Katie's experience embodies the strenuous physical effects of internalizing Freddie's confused and confusing emotional state, which left a lasting and demanding impression on many of these readers. Megan, for instance, described how spending time with this book felt like assuming a significant burden: not unlike a boat that temporarily takes on water in stormy seas, it "*really lingered ... and was very heavy*," and as she articulated the mental effects of this weight in physical terms, "*it sort of just sunk into my consciousness and stayed with me for a few days*."

Just as trauma represents an unnatural irruption in the chronological fabric of everyday life, so does Barry's intimate, complex, and unnerving account of childhood seem to deprive these readers of what they anticipate a comics reading experience to feel like. Deprived of these comforts, however, readers may also find themselves encouraged

to begin new conversations about why the text is so discomforting, and as they consider their roles as future educators, to pose challenging questions regarding the emotional lives of younger people. Following her second reading of the book, Heather also described her physical state as one of exhaustion: "*I was just like, 'Man',*" she told herself, *"'I'm going to take a second,' because I had to go get some water, and just sit and breathe it out.*" "*On the verge of crying*," and thinking about "*how fleeting childhood and adolescence really is*," Heather then turned to her partner and said, "*You need to read this*," and then – after he'd read it – she told him, "*We need to talk*." Despite the resistance that readers encountered in and with this book, it also seems to have brought some readers together in conversation, signaling the ways that confusion – in reading, as in life – may lead to the formulation of necessary, if also sometimes difficult, questions.

Memory-Reading

Given the frequently incomprehensible effects of Freddie's trauma, in their group discussions a number of readers turned the interpretive lens away from the text and towards themselves in memory, which signals the fact that – especially when stories are at their most impenetrable – the reader often depends on who they remember themselves to be as a way to interpret the literary lives of others. In reading such moments of remembering, we find it useful to recall Phillips' suggestion that memories operate "more like a dream than a piece of documentary evidence" (66), and that "the past can only return as disarray in de-narrativized fragments" (67). Certainly, this is not to say that all memories are false, but that – as with any creative imaginings about the past – they are inevitably prone to unconscious movement, modification, and fragmentation. Moreover, as Ricoeur emphasizes, in regards to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, "an

exhaustive narrative is a performatively impossible idea" (448). As such, we recognize our interpretations as necessarily tentative, and refer to the following memories only insofar as they can tell us something about readers' experiences working through representations of trauma in *The Freddie Stories*.

AS A KID I GOT SLEEP PARALYSIS A LOT, AND NO ONE KNEW WHAT THAT WAS. THE FIRST TIME IT HAPPENED I WOKE UP AND THE GRIM REAPER WAS HOVERING AT THE END OF MY BED.
AHA
THE SECOND TIME I GOT A FLASH OF A LADY WHO HAD BEEN MY FRIEND BUT DECIDED TO SLIT HER WRISTS TO ESCAPE HER ABUSIVE HUSBAND.
THE THIRD TIME A VOICE SAID 'THIS IS WHAT HELL WILL BE LIKE" AND I WOKE TO MY ROOM ON FIRE.
SO FROM AN EARLY AGE I SOMEHOW FELT THAT THERE WERE SHADOWS SURROUNDING AND FOLLOWING ME.

Fig. 15: *Adult Memories of Adolescent Night Terrors*

As part of our discussion, Megan shared a self-authored graphic narrative similar in style to Barry's comics, detailing a difficult period from early adolescence, where she "felt like dreams were semi-overlapping with waking reality." After discussing these past experiences with night terrors – which she called "*a weird state*" of "*depersonalization*" – Megan considered how the changing figures of Freddie's visions, while appearing to him as a series of monsters, may also represent an uncertain assemblage of Freddie's multiple fears. For example, just like the figurative shadow in her response, she described Old Buddy as "*a weird condensation of ... every single kind of darkness that [Freddie's]*

scared of, rolled up into one dude." Dealing with this moving constellation of various projected anxieties, it is no surprise that Freddie is unable to present a consistent version of Old or New Buddy, and just as their changing shape represents an interruption of Freddie's self-coherence, so do these readers experience a confusing lack of consistency – both about themselves and about the text they read.

Similar to Megan's night terrors, as a young adolescent Simon endured a period of acute emotional stress – a "*weird, existential thing*" – in which, as he explained, "*I remember having anxiety about the world ending, and ... I would lie awake [all] night*." While comparing his own experiences to Freddie's, Simon noted a feeling of emotional equivalence: "*[Freddie's trauma] doesn't directly mirror what I'm familiar with*," he told us, "*but it feels authentic, in the spirit*." As a comparable story of *spiritual* resemblance, Katie recalled how her father's disciplinary measures – such as temporarily locking her in the basement with the lights off – felt similar to how Freddie was sometimes treated by his mother. However, as she described a child's perceptive abilities as prone to various kinds of embellishment and exaggeration, she also claimed that her memory about these events might be similarly imperfect: "*The longest he ever kept me there*," she told us, "*was two minutes, but I felt like it was hours, like in my memory that's what it was, because – you know – you're a kid; that's how you perceive things*." In her discussion, Aly also noted that when adults remember scenes from childhood, an inner conflict takes place between the perspective of the remembering person *as adult* and their perspective *as child*: "*when you look back on childhood memories ... with maybe a more mature perspective*" she said, *"you think something happened in a certain way, but ... something isn't right about it. You still have that childhood dream-like fantasy going on*." For both

Katie and Aly, the perspective of the child within can sometimes conflict with that of the adult remembering. Nonetheless, despite her suspicions that children perceive reality differently than adults, Katie quickly turned to another story about herself as child.

"*One night*," as she recalled, "*there was a mosquito in my room and ... I could hear it buzzing in my ear, so ... I went to my parent's room and they were like, 'Go to bed, Katie. Doesn't matter.' But I was terrified. Yeah, it mattered!*" Though Katie also recognized the considerable gap between this memory and Freddie's suffering, she used her example as a way to illuminate the potential difference between a child's experience and the tendency of adults to trivialize the concerns of younger people: "*To an adult*," she continued, "*they're like, 'Oh, whatever.' But to me, I was very traumatized ... and I had a hard time sleeping in my room for weeks.*" Just like Freddie was unable to stop seeing the burning skulls, and regardless of how many times he told himself that such visions were not real – "Obviously my imagination. Obviously. Obviously" (54) – Katie could not stop hearing the buzzing mosquito. By sharing this memory, Katie was therefore able to closely identify with Freddie's suffering and his childhood point of view.

For Heather, on the other hand – and though she experienced "*a lot of flashbacks to ... childhood*" while reading – such close identification was challenging, as her return to the past was to a place of disavowed, inaccessible memory. Indeed, as she explained, "*The majority of my childhood is repressed. ... I had ... a very, very abusive family ... [and] my mother took myself and my younger sister out of there as soon as she could.*" Directing her group's attention to the pages with Freddie and Free Dog – where Barry asks, "If these pages burned up in a fire, Free Dog and Freddie would survive. But

where?" (128) – Heather presented a similar question: "*If your childhood burnt up in a fire, if you couldn't remember your childhood, it still exists, but where does it exist?*"

In other words, as she explicitly described her childhood as partly repressed, Heather also appeared to recognize that what is repressed or forgotten does not simply disappear, but continues to circulate as a powerful undercurrent of lived experience. Or, as Ahmed writes of the interpretive demands of deconstruction: "what is relegated to the margins is often … right at the centre of thought itself" (4). For Heather, her own experiences with traumatic memory loss compel her to question the meanings of a past that she cannot now remember, which also provokes an especially empathic understanding of Freddie's condition: "*Where does my childhood exist*," she asks, "*if it doesn't exist when I was a child?*" As Freddie's story is punctuated by flames both real and imagined, Heather's comments encourage a reading of trauma that takes the narrative implications of such metaphor seriously. "With a vector … that can cut through (or across) texts," (Crawford 362), this metaphor of fire invites readers to feel who they are and were as an integral part, and a burning between, of the curious condensations of text and self.

If these pages burned up in a fire, Free Dog and Freddie would survive. But where? And how? It's more than ordinary memory. They seem to have a certain aliveness that feels to be on-going
When this collection was first put together in the early 1990's, some strips were left out for being too strange or depressing. Some presented continuity problems which seemed important at the time.
Fig. 16: *The Freddie Stories* 128

Referring to the same section of the book as Heather, Suzanne interpreted Free Dog as a manifestation of Freddie himself – "*I kind of thought that the dog was Freddie*" – and much as Old Buddy may be a projection of Freddie's fears, Free Dog appears as a condensation of his hope, vulnerabilities, and innocence. Drawing on the proposed equivalence between these characters, Suzanne then shared a story about herself and an abandoned cat, showing how the effects and events of Barry's text are mirrored in the reader's subsequent uses of memory. "*In November, when I went home*," she began:

> *I found a kitty under the hood of my mom's vehicle, and it was just sitting there and we could hear it meowing. We opened the hood, and ... my sister grabbed it before it went under, and it kind of burnt its whiskers. And then we took it out and my mom's like, "Put it back." She's like, "leave it there." ... And she's like, "Throw it outside where it belongs." ... And we're like, "No, mom, no!"*

Just like with Freddie, Suzanne's mom initially refused to allow this stray animal into her house. However, after pleading with her mom, Suzanne ended up accepting responsibility for the cat herself: "*And we kept the kitty*," she told us, "*and now she's my kitty*." Since Suzanne views Freddie and Free Dog as one and the same, this particular interpretation can also be read as a hopeful wish for resilience and survival, where Free Dog appears as a part of Freddie that he needs to abandon – such as childhood naïveté and happiness – but yet, as with Heather's discussion of repressed memory, this is also a part of Freddie that never fully disappears.

Though Barry's initial collection of these stories ended with Freddie waving goodbye to Free Dog, the latter's reappearance in the more recently written Afterword suggests that nothing abandoned is truly ever abandoned for good. While this may be a

commentary on the recursive nature of traumatic memory, it may also – in a more hopeful way – indicate the underlying resilience and perseverance of that which childhood trauma has otherwise seemed to destroy. If Freddie is Free Dog, then the memory of Suzanne's concern for the stray cat – shared in the context of Barry's story – may also describe a reparative wish for Suzanne to nurture stray and forgotten fragments of self and other; or, as she referred to them, "*people that used to be in my life that are not anymore ... parts of me that are hurting that I never even knew were there.*"

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have discussed the context of reading about and along with trauma, examining the responses of undergraduate readers engaged in conversation with each other about Lynda Barry's *The Freddie Stories*. While interpreting these discussions, we were struck by the remarkable parallels between readers' responses and the psychic disorganizations of Freddie's experience. As readers of *difficult knowledge* may encounter "a kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know" (Pitt and Britzman 756), since Barry's text – which, in this case, is the narrative desired *to be known* – is inscribed from within the perspective of trauma's address, the trauma in the text appears to continue speaking, belatedly, through the reader's reading experience. In analyzing their encounters with Freddie's life, we noticed the following echoes of traumatic meaning:

- Chronology, character, and narrative no longer appeared as reliable textual markers;
- Uncharacteristic physical effects suggested a powerful undercurrent of psychic unrest; and

- Multiple readers were drawn to spaces of memory, metaphor, and childhood, as a means of articulating the otherwise incomprehensible elements of Freddie's stories.

In all three cases – getting lost, experiencing the physical effects of reading, and turning to memory – it appears that the reader's inability to adequately and convincingly describe the full extent of Freddie's experience compels them to emotionally enact and perform the effects of this trauma that they cannot otherwise speak. As with the loss of Freddie's capacity for memory, language, and narrative, their understanding proceeds apart from the bounds of what language and memory can actually do. In brief, and as a direct result of its inaccessibility, it appears that to be read, the knowledge and significance of trauma in *The Freddie Stories* also needs to be performed.

However, if this reading is indeed a performance and repetition of trauma's effects, this is also a reading that can never be fully aware of its own meanings, and it is therefore worth considering what readers, and future teachers, actually have to gain from such an experience. As we have mentioned elsewhere in this paper, though there is an important difference between feeling the emotional effects of trauma and actually being traumatized, both experiences will nonetheless inevitably disturb and compromise the idea of reading as a cognitive, self-conscious practice. As the result of such disturbance, however, readers may learn to recognize the enfolded temporalities of trauma as a privileged and uncommon view of human experience. Indeed, as Morrigan notes, in her discussion of "the queer time travel of trauma" (58) – and while describing herself as a person who regularly experiences trauma-related flashbacks, structural dissociation, and a "disconnected, disoriented, unmapped" (50) relationship to time – she refuses to label

these differences as "a problem, a tragedy, or an unfortunate condition requiring a cure" (56). Instead, she celebrates these non-normative ways of being and relating to time as a productive, if also sometimes confusing, mode of living. "I … must assert," she maintains, "that I love my embodied experience of queer trauma time. Not being attached to linear, normative time has produced a flexible, imaginative way of being in the world" (57). In a similar fashion, through stumbling on language and turning the text unsurely towards themselves, the readers that we worked with were able to imagine the meanings of Barry's graphic novel apart from the demands of straightforward narrative and linear time. In the context of teaching, the practice of proliferating uncommon textual meaning, and sensing how texts may be read otherwise and apart from the strictures of commonsense, is a way of rehearsing the indefinite values of empathy and humility; reaching blindly into the uncertain spaces inhabited by other readers and meanings, including the spaces inhabited by unknown and unrecognized parts of the self.

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